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SUBJECT: THE LOST BOYS OF BISSAU

REF: A. DAKAR 528
[1](#)B. DAKAR 325

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) During a recent adoption research trip to Guinea-Bissau, several contacts reported that young boys continue to be victims of child trafficking schemes. Children continue to be trafficked from Bissau to Senegal through networks of religious leaders (marabouts) and the GOGB has limited resources to combat this activity. Both the GOGB and NGOs struggle to protect and re-integrate at-risk children, but limited resources and a weak judicial system frustrate their efforts to provide adequate protection. END SUMMARY.

THREATS TO FAMILY STABILITY

[1](#)2. (U) High rates of fertility and maternal mortality, coupled with low life expectancy, result in a tragically large number of children in Guinea-Bissau whose mothers have died. According to local customs, when a mother dies, the father is not responsible for his children's care; instead they are given to a grandmother or an aunt. When these women cannot provide adequate care, they seek one of three options. It appears the most common option is to send boys, as young as six, to wander the streets of Bissau begging or selling phone cards and other small items as they seek food for the day before they return home or to seek shelter with other adolescents. As these boys get older, they increasingly resort to petty crime and gangs for protection and food. Second, some Muslim families send boys to a religious leader, known as a marabout, where they will learn the Koran and how to be a good Muslim. Finally, a small number of families will take the youngest children to one of two centers that care for abandoned children. However, these two centers, Casa Emanuel Orphanage and SOS Village, tend to favor younger children and some perceive they only want the children that are considered easy to care for.

GO TO THE ARABOUT, YOUNG MAN

[1](#)3. (U) While many Marabouts provide the expected spiritual guidance and training to their talibes (students), in recent years GOGB officials have discovered marabout trafficking groups of up to 20 young boys across the border into Senegal, where they are forced to beg in Dakar or other cities and raise money for their marabouts (see Ref A). Initially, the marabouts crossed with the boys at the official border into Senegal, but recent training of border guards has led to increased scrutiny of men crossing with groups of young boys. Consequently, marabouts have begun to sneak into Senegal's Casamance region through the lush forests that dominate the border.

[1](#)4. (U) When interventions are successful in stopping child trafficking, Associacao da Mulher e Crianca or Association for Women and Children (AMIC), an NGO active in Guinea-Bissau, attempts to reintegrate children into their families and society. The children they work with are almost exclusively boys and young men between the ages of 8 and 25 from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Mali as well as

Guinea-Bissau. AMIC reports that attempts to reunite these children with their families are often frustrated because many children do not remember the name of their village or have strong ties to their own families. Unfortunately, even when reunification does occur, the boys are often sent to a marabout again because the family still cannot care for them. Neither AMIC nor the GOGB has resources to house or arrange formal foster care for these children. While AMIC attempts to find the boys' families, they arrange informal foster care through their own local contacts. AMIC currently tracks over 40 boys that have been reunited with their families to ensure they are in school and receiving proper care, but the growing number of children makes such efforts increasingly difficult.

CHILD TRAFFICKING A GROWING PROBLEM

15. (U) While ConOff was in Guinea-Bissau to research international adoptions, every contact wanted to discuss the growing issue of child trafficking and the vulnerable status of children in Bissau. The Child Protection Office in the Bissau Police Department is very concerned about the growing number of boys engaging in petty crime and forming gangs. They estimate at least 1,000 children are on the street without any place to go. They do not have any facilities to house juveniles separately from adults, and even when they detect child abuse, they do not have a facility or resources to move children to a safe place. The Secretary of State for Public Order in the Ministry of the Interior expressed his appreciation for the USG's concern for children's issues in Bissau and asked for additional USG attention and assistance to the issue of child trafficking, stressing the importance the current Bissau-Guinean government gives the issue.

16. (SBU) The UNICEF Country Representative told ConOff that President Vieira had a very emotional reaction and was visibly disturbed when he was informed of the extent of child trafficking

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along the border with Senegal. UNICEF is conducting a field study to evaluate the problem, and it has a weekly working group meeting with the Government and NGOs to address children's issues. However, he also said the World Bank has resources available for orphans and vulnerable children which no one in Bissau is using.

POTENTIAL FOR ADOPTION FRAUD

17. (SBU) To date, very few foreigners, mostly Spanish and Portuguese, have adopted orphans from Guinea-Bissau. Most of the orphans were staying at the Casa Emanuel Orphanage, which is run by two Costa Rican and one Brazilian missionaries. According to orphanage officials, the adopted children were genuine orphans. ConOff reviewed Casa Emanuel's screening procedures, and they appear to limit the potential for adoption fraud.

18. (SBU) However, there is considerable potential for baby and child-selling schemes if an adoption agency or other orphanages open with ill-intentioned directors. The weak judiciary, large number of abandoned and vulnerable children, and overwhelming poverty create an environment conducive to child exploitation. ConOff spoke to one adoption lawyer who mistook her for a potential client and openly admitted that he pays bribes to GOGB officials when processing international adoptions. He bragged that the judge was an old friend from school who signed off on anything as long as all the papers were submitted, usually within two weeks.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) Child trafficking networks in Guinea-Bissau are changing tactics to avoid increasing GOGB attention, further complicating efforts to measure and stop the problem. Resources are limited and the various organizations working on child trafficking are not integrating their efforts. The combination of large numbers of vulnerable children, weak laws and government institutions, and wide spread corruption, has resulted in large numbers of children being trafficked to Senegal and could lead to adoption fraud if organizations learn there is money to be made in facilitating international adoptions. Post has not yet received an approval or rejection of the anti-trafficking in persons proposal to G/TIP (Ref

B), but we continue to believe that project is the best way to address this growing problem. END COMMENT.

¶10. (U) Visit Embassy Dakar's classified website at <http://www.state.sgov/gov/p/af/dakar/>.

JACOBS